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Sustainable Showcase Project: Student Pathway to Understanding Sustainability in the Apparel and Home Furnishings Industries

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Keywords: merchandising, visuals, sustainability, experiential

Introduction and Purpose of the Strategy

As consumers increasingly look to textile and apparel industry firms to be more sensitive and reactive to significant social issues, it is necessary for university fashion majors to understand the key issues and philosophies related to sustainability that directly affect the fashion industry and its customers. Sustainability is a resource consumption concept that focuses on utilizing renewable resources in order to reduce the consumption of non-renewable resources so as not to cause harm to people or the planet. Thus, an important aspect of people and companies transitioning to sustainability is to focus on the idea of recycling, or reusing resources. Because recycling is an activity that can be performed by everyone and any act of recycling supports the concept of sustainability, no matter how inconsequential it seems, a course project focused on recycling is valid. Through the *Sustainable Showcase Project*, fashion merchandising majors enrolled in a fashion promotion course researched recycling trends in the fashion industry, designed a variety of recycled products, and exhibited findings in a display window on campus viewed by students across the university. Successful completion of the project resulted in a broader understanding of the impact that recycling by the textile and apparel industries has on the world at large, understanding needed as program graduates enter careers that may involve making sustainability decisions.

Project Design and Implementation

At the beginning of the semester, fashion merchandising students enrolled in a Fashion Promotion course were assigned the *Sustainable Showcase Project*, a project that consisted of four essential components as follows:

- The *Display Windows Theme Proposal* that required five student teams to each create a Windows Theme Proposal that focused on communicating an overview of the importance of sustainability through recycling in the textiles and apparel industries. The written proposal was to outline a thoroughly developed plan for one large themed display window, including all merchandise, props, lighting, and signage that would be included. In addition to the written proposal, teams were to submit a presentation board as a visual representation of the concept.
- A *Merchandise Selection and Buying Trip* with the instructor was allowed for each student team. Prior to the trip, the instructor provided the team with a budget for the

window display based on the previously developed plan. As a result, each team created a final list of required merchandise and props needed for the display, and a trip to a local retailer was made with the purchasing completed by the instructor with program funds. This aspect of the project taught students to work within a prescribed budget and be very precise about planning prior to the purchase phase.

- The *Store Windows Design Execution* was completed as per the developed window theme utilizing a display window in the building where the program is located. A different team installed their window every two weeks based on a schedule during the semester developed by the instructor. After completion, the instructor provided written and verbal evaluations of the window displays to the groups.
- The *Recycled Design Competition* was the final component of the project that consisted of a competition within the class that requested submission of apparel and home furnishings products made of recycled materials. One winner in each of the two categories was selected by faculty members and a student panel. Winning students were awarded a \$150 scholarship and had their product featured in the display window during the last three weeks of the semester.

Effectiveness and Continuation of the Activity

The *Sustainable Showcase Project* engaged fashion promotion students in a group experiential learning activity that allowed teams to work together to solve problems and manage situations while gaining practical retail merchandising experience in project management and visual merchandising. Group experiential learning provides common and, often times, novel experiences in which students must work together to solve problems and manage situations. Overall, the completion of the project was successful based on instructor analysis of the effectiveness of focusing on recycling as well as the continued interest of the students and the improvements that students made working in teams. The students felt that the project was a great opportunity for them to put their visual merchandising skills into practice while helping to promote recycling and learning strategies to work together better in a team environment. In addition, completion of the project that required changing window displays throughout the semester absolutely made a positive visual change in the large departmental display window and engaged all departmental students in the idea of recycling for an extended period of time.

Overall, the *Sustainable Showcase Project* increased recycling awareness and provided an essential overview of the importance of a sustainable textile and apparel industry. By completing the comprehensive project, the students ultimately gained a better understanding of the importance of recycling in the global fashion industry. For university students, learning more about sustainability and recycling is valuable to better prepare them for future roles in the fashion business. This project will be used for upcoming classes to allow students to use their merchandising knowledge, while continuing to heighten awareness of the importance of recycling and its impact on the future.